Helena Augusta

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SUMMARY*

This dissertation about Flavia Julia Helena Augusta, the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor (b. A.D. 273, reigned 306-337), is divided into two parts. The first part (Chapter One) deals with the historical Helena; the second part, consisting of Chapters Two, Three and Four, deals with the legends which grew up around her. The purpose of the first part of the book is to ascertain the facts of Helena's life on the basis of reliable historical sources. The second part investigates the origin and function of the legends concerning the discovery of the Holy Cross of Christ on the Rock of Golgotha in Jerusalem by Helena or by a figure substituted for Helena, which were developed after her death. Fact and fiction, which are so often confused in the secondary literature, will thus be carefully distinguished.

Part One (= Ch. 1)

The sources on Helena's life are neither abundant nor of a great variety. Among the literary sources the most important are Eusebius (*Vita Constantini*), Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Zosimus, the *Chronica* and the *Liber Pontificalis*. Archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic material may allow some further inferences. But the sources are not sufficient for a full biography of Helena.

Neither the place nor the date of Helena's birth can be established with certainty. The place, it may probably be inferred, was Drepanum in Bithynia; for in 328 Constantine renamed this city "Helenopolis". However, an alternative connection between Helena and Drepanum cannot be ruled out. As to the date, strong evidence puts Helena's death in 328 or 329 and, according to Eusebius, she was about 80 when she died. If this is right, she must have been born about 248 or 249. This is plausible, since Constantine is thought to have been born in 273.

All sources emphasize Helena's humble origins. For this reason she cannot have been the lawful wife of Constantine's father, Constantius Chlorus, a Dalmatian aristocrat and a highly successful officer in the Roman army. Roman law forbade a man to marry below his status, so Helena must, in spite of those sources which state the contrary, be regarded as Constantius's official concubine. In 289 Constantius became a member of Diocletian's newly founded tetrarchy. As a consequence he was obliged to contract a marriage with a woman of equal standing. This brought an end to his relationship with Helena.

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* For help with the translation I would like to thank Dr. A.N. Palmer.

Between her separation from Constantius in 289 and 306, when Constantine became emperor, nothing is known of Helena's life. Even after her son's elevation to the throne the evidence as to her whereabouts is at first by no means unequivocal. It is usually assumed that Helena lived near Constantine's principal residence at this time, namely in Trier, where he kept court during the first ten years of his reign. Trier and the surrounding region do in fact possess a particularly rich store of local legends concerning Helena. These are first firmly attested from the 8th or the 9th century. In the *Vita Helenae* by Altmann of Hautvillers and in the *Life of Helena and Agricius*, Helena, the mother of Constantine, is a member of a prominent family in Trier who bequeathes her house (the *domus Helenae*) to the Church; this house becomes the cathedral church of Trier. The frescoes discovered underneath the cathedral of Trier during excavations shortly after the Second World War are thought by some to corroborate these legends. These frescoes are dated to the period of Constantine; they portray, amongst other figures, four ladies apparently belonging to the imperial family. These have been identified as Constantine's mother Helena, his wife Fausta, his stepsister Constantia, and the younger Helena, wife of his eldest son Crispus. The wedding of Crispus with the younger Helena may have been the occasion for this family portrait. The local traditions may possibly have conflated the elder Helena with the younger, if the latter was a native of Trier.

If Helena's residence at Trier remains unproven, there is good evidence that she lived at Rome from about 312, for the *Liber Pontificalis* names the *fundus Laurentus* as her property. Archaeological evidence links this estate just outside the Aurelian wall with the *Palatium Sessorianum* in the south-eastern quarter of Rome. To this palace, which later became the basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme (also called *basilica Heleniana*) belonged an amphitheatre, a circus and a bath-house. Three inscriptions have been discovered in the area of S. Croce which mention Helena, and a golden *scyphus* engraved with her name was dedicated to the new basilica of the martyrs Marcellinus and Petrus, which was built on the Via Labicana within the boundaries of the *fundus Laurentus*.

Constantine embraced the Christian Faith in 312 and Helena is likely to have been converted soon afterwards. Her interest in Christianity is demonstrated by the adaptation of a part of her *palatium* to the function of a chapel on the site of S. Croce. There is no sound basis for J. Vogt's theory that she once was an adherent of Judaism.

From 324, when Constantine became sole ruler of the Empire, Helena became one of the pillars of the Constantinian dynasty. Her son gave her the title "Augusta", and her new status was proclaimed throughout the empire by the issue of coin-series which bore the legend SECURITAS REIPUBLICE (*sic*). Six of the eight authentic Latin inscriptions dedicated to

Helena must be dated after 324, because they give her the title "Augusta". This indicates recognition of her new status and importance within the Constantinian dynasty.

The most important event of Helena's life was her journey to the eastern provinces in 327-328. Soon after her death this came to be seen as a pilgrimage. Eusebius (*VC* III 42-47) portrays the empress as a pious and compassionate Christian who came to Palestine in order to pray, to dedicate new churches and to take care of the poor. This picture is false and incomplete. Helena's journey to the east was not that of a pilgrim to the Holy Land alone, but that of an Augusta visiting all the provinces in the eastern half of the empire. The purpose of this visit must be sought in Constantine's rigorous policy of Christianization after 324. This policy, manifested in the building of churches, in Constantine's public letters to the inhabitants of the eastern provinces and in his preferential treatment of the Christians, did not enjoy general support. The larger part of the population of the empire, even in the more christianized eastern part of it, were still pagans. When Constantine left the east for Rome at the beginning of 326, the eastern provinces were left in a state of unease about his policy of Christianization. In the same year he murdered his wife Fausta and his son Crispus, which exacerbated the situation. The Augusta was most probably sent to the east to appease those sections of the population and of the army which were in turmoil and to propagate Christianity by lavishing care on the poor and the distressed.

Helena died shortly after her journey, probably at the end of 328 or the beginning of 329. She was buried in a porphyry sarcophagus in the mausoleum built by Constantine next to the above-mentioned basilica of Saints Marcellinus and Petrus outside Rome.

Part Two (= Chs. 2, 3 and 4)

Helena owed her posthumous fame to the legend of the Finding of the True Cross. This legend developed in the second half of the fourth century and was rapidly disseminated. Three main versions can be discerned up to A.D. 450: the legend of Helena (H), the legend of Protonike (P), and the legend of Judas/Cyriacus (C). Chapter Two deals with H.

In the 340s, before the story of the Finding of the Cross came into existence, the Cross itself was already venerated in Jerusalem and parts of it had already been distributed as relics throughout the Roman world. In the course of the fourth century the Cross became the principal Christian symbol. In the second half of the same century a story came into being about how the Cross was found and by whom, probably at first in oral form.

One of the first extant texts containing the legend of Helena is the *Church History* of Rufinus. Rufinus's work is partly a translation of the lost Greek *Church History* of Gelasius of Caesarea and this has now been shown to have been his source for the legend of Helena. Gelasius may have been the first to write the story down, but there can be little doubt that earlier versions, originating in the Holy Land, circulated orally before that. Minor deviations, insertions and omissions are the only original features in the legend as retailed by the ecclesiastical historians Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret.

Different versions of the legend are given by Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus. The one by Ambrose has long been considered the original version. Since it is now clear that a Greek text (that of Gelasius) predates all the Latin versions, it seems likely that pilgrims first brought the legend to the Latin West by word of mouth. Paulinus, for example, heard it first from Melania the Elder, who brought him back a fragment of the True Cross, together with the story of its discovery, which she had heard in Jerusalem.

How did the legend come into existence and why was the discovery ascribed to Helena? The very presence of the True Cross in Jerusalem itself elicited such an explanatory legend. But political considerations played their part in shaping the legend; it can be read as propaganda. In the fourth century metropolitan jurisdiction in the ecclesiastical province of Palestine was disputed between the bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, considered his see spiritually superior to that of Caesarea, the secular capital, and claimed the status of a metropolitan bishop for himself. Here was a motive for emphasizing a relationship between the imperial court and Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is known that Cyril frequently referred to the Cross in promoting his see. Not only the Cross and the imperial family but also the bishop of Jerusalem feature prominently in the legend of Helena. The identification by Helena of the True Cross was made possible by Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem. The legend thus served to give prominence to the position of Jerusalem in the Christian world. The Christian Augusta Helena, who had been idealized by Eusebius in the *Vita Constantini*, was known from that source to have travelled to Palestine. She was thus a good candidate for the role of Discoverer in the Legend of the Cross.

This discussion of H in Chapter Two is followed in Chapter Three by an analysis of the variant legends P and C, concerning respectively Protonike and Cyriacus. Morphologically, P is similar to H, but Helena is replaced by the queen Protonike, an imaginary wife of Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41-54). P is Syrian in origin; it was incorporated around 400 in the Syriac *Doctrina Addai* (*DA*), but it also circulated independently. The earliest witness to P is the Leningrad manuscript of the *DA*, which has been dated to the sixth century.

The *DA* can be regarded as an "orthodox" Christian treatise written in Edessa at the end of the third century and directed against the popular gnostic movement of Manichaeism.

Scholars have not been able to find a good reason for the insertion of P in the *DA*. In the present study it is argued that the Legend of the Cross itself should be regarded as an anti-gnostic document. Queen Protonike, whose name is given in some manuscripts as Petronike, meaning 'victory of Peter', is a staunch supporter of Peter. Simon Peter had undertaken a journey to Rome in order to expose the falsehood of the gnostic doctrine of Simon Magus. The discovery of the Cross by Protonike was intended as conclusive proof of the falsehood of gnostic doctrines rejecting the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Most of the differences between P and H are due to the fact that P is situated in the first century. Since H is demonstrably earlier, P must derive from it.

The third variant, C, can be shown to be partially dependent on P. It, too, is of Syrian origin. C tells the story of the second discovery of the Cross after it had gone missing during the reign of Trajan. It might be said to continue where P leaves off and to reconcile P with H; however, it introduces some new elements as well. The earliest manuscript and the best witness to the text of C is Br. Mus. Add. MS. 14,644, which has been dated between the fifth and the seventh centuries. In C Helena holds the Jews responsible for hiding the Cross; she finds it again with the help of Judas, a Jew. Judas is subsequently converted to Christianity and is given the name Cyriacus. C must have originated in the first half of the fifth century. After a short period of relative neglect C became the version most favoured by medieval Christians; this popularity may be due to its anti-Jewish elements.

In conclusion, Chapter Four analyzes the changing message of the legend from its first propagation as H, through its transformation at Edessa into P, to the "definitive version", C. H is best understood as a product of the controversy between the episcopal sees of Jerusalem and Caesarea. H has some anti-pagan elements and Ambrose and Paulinus insert mildly anti-Jewish comments in their orally-derived versions of the legend; on the whole, however, H cannot be described as a tract directed against another religious community. P can be interpreted as an anti-gnostic document, but it also contains some statements that are certainly anti-Jewish. C, on the other hand, is nothing but anti-Jewish. Thus the story of the Finding of the Cross developed into an anti-Jewish treatise. The legend lent itself to such a transformation. In the climate of that time the finding of the Cross elicited a condemnation of the Jews for their part in the Crucifixion of the Messiah.

The changing function of the legend keeps pace with a growing resentment towards Jewry in Late Antiquity. Judaism was still a redoubtable rival

of Christianity. There is evidence for the growth of this resentment in the statements of prominent Church Fathers such as Ambrose, Jerome, John Chrysostom; it is also attested by imperial legislation. The laws of the first half of the fifth century reveal an exceptional ferocity against the Jews; these laws were probably inspired by the Church.

The dissertation closes with two Appendices. Appendix I deals with the portraits of Helena. Of the many candidates only four appear to be genuine portraits of Helena; two of them are statues, two are miniature portraits, one on a cameo and one on a gem. Appendix II gives Dutch translations of the variant versions of the Legend of the Cross.

The legend of the Finding of the Cross is pure fiction. Nevertheless, it is this legend, not the reality of her life, which made Helena a famous saint of the Universal Church.